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Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Abyei

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 32 of Security Council resolution 2352 (2017), in which the Council requested to be informed of progress in implementing the mandate of the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) and to have any serious violations of all applicable agreements brought to its immediate attention. It also provides an update on the status of the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism, as requested in paragraph 8 of resolution 2352 (2017). It covers the period since the issuance of my previous report (S/2017/649), from 25 July to 7 October 2017.

II. Abyei

Conflict dynamics and security situation

2. Conflict in the Abyei Area continued to be characterized by four trends. First, there were reports of intercommunal violence over access to grazing land and water during the annual migration of the Misseriya, which has been a traditional source of conflict between the Misseriya and the Ngok Dinka. Second, criminal activities at the Amiet common market were a persistent problem, with the potential to exacerbate intercommunal tensions as the two communities intermingle at the market and in the surrounding areas. Third, incidents of petty crime continued, largely as a result of the adverse economic situation in the Abyei Area, which includes a lack of livelihood opportunities and the prevalence of arms. Fourth, the presence of armed groups created the potential for inflaming tensions between the two communities. Overall, the number of violent incidents in the Area decreased during the reporting period, which coincided with the rainy season, as compared with the previous period. In particular, there was a marked reduction in violence at the Amiet common market, following proactive engagement by UNISFA with both communities and its robust military posture, which was reinforced at certain flashpoints. Despite a number of violent incidents, the security situation in the Area remained relatively calm. Nonetheless, the situation continued to be volatile, in the absence of progress in implementing the Agreement of 20 June 2011 and establishing the final status of the Area.

3. During the annual southward migration, an estimated 35,000 Misseriya arrived in the Abyei Area. Their subsequent reverse migration northward was delayed by the late arrival of the rains, but was completed by the end of July. The conflict

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prevention and mitigation strategy adopted by UNISFA, based on the disengagement line between the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities, was effective in reducing large-scale violence, although sporadic incidents continued during the rainy season. One serious incident of cattle-rustling occurred between Goli and Todach, Sector North, on 27 July, in which Ngok Dinka assailants killed three Misseriya herders and stole 141 cows. While the assailants managed to evade UNISFA patrols, the mission recovered and returned 135 of the cows.

4. The significance of the Amiet common market as an economic hub continued to grow, especially in the light of the adverse economic conditions in South Sudan, as the market provides access to otherwise unavailable or costly goods and services. The escalation seen in the number of violent incidents in the vicinity of the market in June and July persisted briefly. On 27 July, two Ngok Dinka men were stabbed in the market; both were treated for their injuries at the local hospital in Agok, Sector South. The following day at the market, on the basis of information provided by Misseriya traders, UNISFA apprehended a Misseriya individual who was suspected of orchestrating the attack. The individual was handed over to Misseriya community leaders on 31 July.

5. With intercommunal tensions running high, UNISFA convened separate meetings with Misseriya community leaders in Diffra, Sector North, and with Ngok Dinka community leaders in Dokura, Sector Centre, respectively, on 26 July. Through those meetings, UNISFA was able to broker an agreement with each community to address contentious issues using the joint peace committees. Leaders from the two communities met in Dokura on 27 July, where they agreed to resolve existing problems by using traditional mechanisms. It was the first time since 2011 that Misseriya community leaders had been welcomed by the Ngok Dinka in Dokura.

6. On 30 July, the joint peace committee comprising members of both the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities agreed that the Ngok Dinka community would pay restitution for the 11 Misseriya community members killed in the attacks on 22 July and 27 July. On 22 July, eight Misseriya had been killed on the road between the Amiet common market and Diffra, Sector North (see S/2017/649, para. 11). Trading in the market had been suspended following that attack and the committee also agreed that the market would be reopened immediately to avoid creating further hardship for both communities. This was the second closure of the market in July, with the first following the killing of two Ngok Dinka along the Amiet road on 9 July (ibid., para. 10); the market had re-opened on 19 July.

7. During the reporting period, UNISFA facilitated 82 meetings of the joint peace committee in the three sectors to strengthen intercommunal relations and facilitate reconciliation. In general, intercommunal violence in the Area has subsided since August, notwithstanding a few incidents. On 5 August, two Ngok Dinka were killed and one was injured in Dungoup, Sector Centre, allegedly by a group of Misseriya.

8. Sector Centre continued to be the area with the highest level of crime, as the location of the Amiet common market and owing to its position on the only all-weather route from the town of Abyei towards Diffra and Farouk, Sector North. However, criminal activity has diminished during the ongoing rainy season as a result of hampered mobility. UNISFA continued both aerial and ground patrols around the market and surrounding roads to provide a deterrent security presence.

9. Petty crime remained largely intra-ethnic. An affray involving Ngok Dinka young people in the market, on 13 August, led to the detention of 17 young people by the community protection committee. Some 100 young people protested against the detention, and UNISFA worked with the Ngok Dinka Paramount Chief to contain the situation. In a separate incident, 11 detainees escaped from the detention

cell at the market on 27 August. Members of the community protection committee, in conjunction with UNISFA, apprehended all the escapees. However, one member was injured in the process and subsequently received treatment at the UNISFA clinic.

10. There were two further civilian fatalities in the Abyei Area during the reporting period, in addition to the five people killed in violent intercommunal incidents mentioned in paragraphs 3 and 4. On 26 August, in Jok Jul, near Agok in Sector South, one Ngok Dinka individual was shot dead by unknown assailants. In a separate incident in Agok on the same day, a Nuer language assistant at a hospital run by an international non-governmental organization was shot by three unidentified assailants; he died in hospital a few days later.

11. In addition, there were frequent reports from the local population indicating the presence of unknown armed groups around Sink, Shegeg, Um Khariet and Alal, in Sector North, and around Dungoup, Sector Centre. UNISFA apprehended an armed South Sudanese individual wearing a South Sudan National Police Service uniform near Noong, Sector Centre, on 16 August, and handed him over to the Ngok Dinka traditional chiefs and South Sudanese national monitors on 19 August. Meanwhile, the Government of the Sudan continued to maintain some 120 police personnel at the Diffra oil complex in the northern Abyei Area. The presence, albeit occasional, of South Sudanese security service personnel and the deployment of Diffra oil police units in the Area directly violate the Agreement of 20 June 2011 and contravene Security Council resolutions 1990 (2011) and 2046 (2012), as well as subsequent resolutions that stipulate that the Area is to be demilitarized, including the withdrawal of all national forces or armed elements of the local communities, except for the presence of UNISFA and the Abyei Police Service.

12. In the light of the sources of insecurity mentioned above, UNISFA continued its efforts to keep the Abyei Area free of weapons. On 11 August, near Shegeg, mission personnel apprehended two Misseriya men in possession of an assault rifle magazine with 30 live rounds and a dagger. In line with the UNISFA mandate to confiscate and destroy weapons, the Mine Action Service destroyed 12 weapons and 108 rounds of small arms ammunition at the UNISFA weapons and ammunition management facility, in a process observed by national monitors from the Sudan and South Sudan. During the reporting period, the Service delivered mine risk education messages to 227 individuals, bringing the total number of persons reached to date within the Area to 64,670, including UNISFA personnel, nomadic herders and returnees. The delivery of the messages, which promote the identification and clearance of explosive ordnance in the Area, in conjunction with the conducting of non-technical surveys, led to the identification and destruction of three explosive remnants of war.

Political developments

13. UNISFA operations continued to enhance peace and stability within the Abyei Area through a robust and targeted military posture and rapid deployment in cases of intercommunal violence. The mission has also been able to adapt to changing conditions, such as the seasonal migration of the Misseriya. Efforts such as the UNISFA initiative to support dialogue between the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities have enabled improved intercommunal relations and facilitated stability and reconciliation in the Area. Despite the mission's determination to prevent the recurrence of violence or displacement of civilians, intercommunal tensions persisted in the absence of progress in the implementation of the Agreement of 20 June 2011 or the settlement of the final status of the Area.

14. The Sudan and South Sudan have diametrically opposed positions on the way forward to settle the Abyei question. The Government of the Sudan and the Misseriya insist that their representation in the Abyei Area must be equal to that of their Ngok Dinka counterparts. It should be recalled that, according to the Agreement of 20 June 2011, the Abyei Area Administration should consist of a Chief Administrator nominated by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Government of South Sudan, a Deputy Chief Administrator nominated by the Government of the Sudan and five heads of department, three from the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Government of South Sudan and two from the Government of the Sudan. As to the Abyei Area Council, the parties agreed that it would be composed of 20 members, with the Chairperson to be elected by the members from a list of three nominees from the Government of the Sudan. The Government of South Sudan and Ngok Dinka community leaders disagree with the prospect of equal representation, citing the Agreement of 20 June 2011, as well as the Abyei Protocol, which defined Abyei as the area of the nine Ngok Dinka chiefdoms transferred to Kordofan in 1905, providing the Misseriya with access based only on their traditional rights to graze cattle. They also invoke the final award by the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague, Netherlands, in 2009, which recognized the Ngok Dinka claim on the Abyei Area as the traditional region of the nine Ngok Dinka chiefdoms. The Sudan continues to insist that the establishment of these joint institutions under the Agreement of 20 June 2011 is the only way forward, while South Sudan disagrees on the need for them, citing that the agreed time frames for their establishment have lapsed.

15. In the continued absence of the Abyei Police Service owing to a disagreement on its composition, police officers deployed as a part of UNISFA maintained their advisory and capacity-building role with the community protection committees in the central and southern parts of Abyei, with a focus on sustaining law and order. On 6 September, UNISFA police officers conducted a two-day workshop to build the capacity of 50 members of the community protection committees based in Abyei town on the management of law and order processes. Delays in the establishment of the Abyei Police Service have left a rule-of-law vacuum in the Abyei Area. The establishment of a special police unit to deal with issues relating to nomadic migration would help to maintain law and order and prevent intercommunal conflict.

16. Since the killing of the Ngok Dinka Paramount Chief, Koul Deng Koul, in Abyei in May 2013, the South Sudanese delegation to the Abyei Joint Oversight Committee continues to insist that all meetings of the Committee be convened outside the Abyei Area until reconciliation is achieved between the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya communities. Despite the various efforts undertaken to support such a reconciliation process, the South Sudanese delegation remains unwilling to engage, arguing that the report by the African Union investigation team into the killing of the Paramount Chief should first be released. The African Union Commission is in consultation with the African Union High-level Implementation Panel to determine the best approach to settle the matter of the investigation report, such that it should serve as a confidence-building step between the two communities.

17. The African Union Commission convened an extraordinary session of the Abyei Joint Oversight Committee, which had not met in more than two years, in Addis Ababa in May. At the meeting, the members resolved to meet every two months, with the next meeting to be held in the last week of July. However, the meeting in July was not convened. To maintain a forum for discussion, the African Union called for a follow-up meeting of the Committee in Addis Ababa on 16 August. This was to be held in conjunction with a meeting of the Ngok Dinka and Misseriya traditional leaders, as agreed at the meeting of the Committee held on

29 and 30 May 2015, to settle the issue of the killing of the Ngok Dinka Paramount Chief in 2013. Both meetings were postponed the day before the scheduled date at the request of South Sudan, which cited the need to await the outcome of the meeting between the President of South Sudan and the President of the Sudan in Khartoum. The Presidents have been expected to meet since July; however, at the time of finalizing the present report, there was no confirmed date for the meeting.

18. According to media reports, the President of South Sudan issued a decree on 14 September, replacing the South Sudanese Co-Chair of the Abyei Joint Oversight Committee, Deng Mading Mijak, with Deng Arop Kuol. The change was described as routine, as Deng Mading Mijak had served in this capacity since 2013.

19. In its resolution 2352 (2017), the Security Council urged the Governments of the Sudan and South Sudan to resume direct negotiations in order to urgently agree on a final settlement of the Abyei question, and called upon the African Union High-level Implementation Panel and the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General to the Sudan and South Sudan to support efforts towards the full implementation of the agreements of 2011. In that regard, during their visit to the two countries in July, the Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations and the Special Envoy engaged with both the Sudan and South Sudan regarding the importance of the concrete progress requested by the Council. This was followed by a joint visit by the African Union, the African Union High-level Implementation Panel and the Department for Peacekeeping Operations in August to seek agreement from the parties on areas in which progress could be made, in particular with regard to the joint institutions stipulated in the Agreement of 20 June 2011. In addition, I wrote to the Chairperson of the African Union Commission on 13 September to seek support for advancing the political resolution of the Abyei issue.

Operating environment

20. As at 7 October, the UNISFA military component stood at 4,316 personnel (4,294 troops and 235 military observers/staff officers), against an authorized ceiling of 4,791. During the reporting period, UNISFA troops conducted 4,044 day patrols and 2,253 night patrols, including 1,431 escorts. The UNISFA police component stood at 33 officers (23 men and 10 women), of an authorized total of 50, which is the highest number deployed since the mission was established. The police officers are deployed at four team sites in Abyei town, Agok, Banton and Diffra. An additional team site will be established at Todach, Sector North, near the Amiet common market, to allow the police to work closely with the community protection committee at the market on law and order issues. The number of civilian staff stood at 137 international, 32 United Nations Volunteers and 81 national staff, against an authorized total of 161 international, 33 United Nations Volunteers and 89 national staff posts. The Government of the Sudan issued 61 visas for UNISFA personnel during the reporting period, while 110 visas remained pending for 18 staff members, 32 military personnel, 13 police officers, 4 Mine Action Service contractors, 26 official visitors and consultants and 17 contractors.

21. The mission continued to upgrade the infrastructure and environmental installations at all camps. Depreciated prefabricated buildings were replaced at seven company operating bases (Farouk, Diffra, Todach and Goli in Sector North and Tejalei, Agok and Marial Achak in Sector South). The conversion of the Noong temporary operating base into a permanent operating base was 92 per cent complete. Site preparation works at the expansion site and the improvement of the challenging living conditions at the mission headquarters in Abyei were 78 per cent complete. The construction of new troop accommodation was completed, while staff accommodation at the expansion site was 61 per cent complete. With regard to the

environmental and hygiene aspects, of the 36 planned wastewater treatment plants for all UNISFA bases, 17 have been installed, of which 15 are operational.

22. UNISFA continued to operate four helicopters and three fixed-wing aircraft. Of the missions undertaken during the reporting period, 13 were aerial patrols of the Abyei Area, 9 were in support of the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism and others were reconnaissance missions. The mission continued to share the costs of one of its aircraft with the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) and received ground-handling support from the contracted services providers of MONUSCO and the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) in Entebbe, Uganda, and Khartoum, respectively. During the reporting period, the mission completed the rotation of 2,105 troops (1,062 inbound and 1,043 outbound) and the transportation of 116,063 kg of goods (41,935 kg inbound and 74,128 kg outbound) through the Kadugli airport, as the mission remained unauthorized by the Government of the Sudan to use the 90 per cent completed airstrip in Athony, which continued to put a considerable strain on its air assets. Similarly, 115,026 kg (41,230 kg inbound and 73,796 kg outbound) of goods were transported by road through Kadugli.

Humanitarian situation

23. Limited or absent basic services, displacements from South Sudan and returnees to the area who had left at the onset of the Abyei crisis resulted in continued significant humanitarian needs in the Abyei Area. United Nations agencies, funds and programmes and non-governmental organizations continued to provide humanitarian and recovery assistance to 163,000 vulnerable people. These included persons displaced from neighbouring areas in South Sudan and seasonal Misseriya nomads. Since my previous report, an estimated 7,500 people displaced by conflict in South Sudan have transited through Abyei to reach destinations in the Sudan. In addition, there were reports of new arrivals from South Sudan who had recently settled in Abyei; exact numbers remained unverified owing to impassable roads during the ongoing rainy season.

24. Despite the logistical challenges, 99 per cent of the food assistance requirement for the rainy season was stored in advance in seven warehouses in central and southern parts of Abyei, through South Sudan. Some 100,000 vulnerable people benefited from activities relating to food assistance, mainly food for assets, food for education and general food distribution for those displaced from South Sudan. Food support continued to be provided to the 27 primary schools in the central and southern parts of the Abyei Area, including Abyei town, reaching 21,700 schoolchildren.

25. The 13 health facilities throughout the Abyei Area remained operational with support from the humanitarian community. In addition, awareness-raising and capacity-building activities were conducted, including on-the-job training for clinical staff, training of elementary health-service personnel and the holding of health awareness sessions. A targeted supplementary feeding programme continued to cover 4,300 children aged under 5 years and pregnant and lactating women. In July, the health cluster conducted a "mop-up" vaccination campaign in three villages north of the River Kiir/Bahr al-Arab. Assistance efforts to provide a safe water supply benefited some 16,000 people. Other major activities during the reporting period included the drilling of four new boreholes, the rehabilitation of eight hand pumps, the construction of 10 school hand-washing facilities and the distribution of water supply containers and hygiene kits to 300 families in the sites established for displaced persons. In the northern Abyei Area, ensuring a safe water

supply remained a challenge as the water table is considerably low and the communities are scattered.

26. Early recovery and transition activities within the reporting period included the construction of a community hall in Abyei town, and the rehabilitation of the Abyei Referral Hospital, Abyei Women's Centre and Abyei Youth Centre had commenced. In addition, more than 200 young people and women were targeted through livelihood ventures, including vegetable production and the promotion of small businesses. As a result of an outbreak of suspected blackleg in Ameth-bek cattle camp, over 30,000 livestock were vaccinated to prevent the spread of diseases as livestock are moved to and from neighbouring areas into the Abyei Area for grazing and to be traded at Amiet market.

27. As a result of the weak local protection institutions and mechanisms within the Abyei Area, women and children continued to be exposed to the risk of violence, exploitation and abuse in some areas. Pursuant to paragraph 29 of Security Council resolution 2352 (2017), UNISFA has completed the recruitment of a Women and Child Protection Adviser. At the time of finalizing the present report, a visa application for the selected candidate had been submitted to the Government of the Sudan on 23 August and was pending approval.

III. Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism

28. In December 2010, the parties had agreed to establish a joint political and security mechanism to facilitate coordination between the security forces of the Sudan and South Sudan in implementing the arrangements of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, particularly on their common border. The agreement of 30 July 2011 established a border monitoring and verification mission, which was made operational as the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism through the agreement on security arrangements of 27 September 2012. Nearly six years later, the Mechanism remains at its initial operating capability, with only two of the four sector headquarters in operation. Despite the lack of progress, the two countries and the African Union view the Mechanism as essential for border security and for facilitating the demarcation of the border. In that connection, the Sudan and South Sudan transmitted a joint letter to the Security Council on 23 September to request the continued support of the United Nations for the Mechanism.

Conditions required to achieve full operating capability

29. Pursuant to Security Council resolution 2352 (2017), during the reporting period, UNISFA engaged with the Governments of the Sudan and South Sudan to make progress in relation to the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism. As stipulated in the resolution, continued investment in achieving the full operating capability of the Mechanism should be based on the conditions outlined in 2015 (see S/2015/439), namely the resolution of the dispute over the Safe Demilitarized Border Zone, the resumption of border demarcation discussions, the holding of regular meetings of the Joint Political and Security Mechanism and the granting of full freedom of movement for the operations of the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism. The status of implementation of these conditions is outlined in the paragraphs below.

Dispute concerning the Safe Demilitarized Border Zone

30. During the extraordinary meeting of the Joint Political and Security Mechanism, held in Addis Ababa on 14 October 2015, the parties agreed that the centreline of the Safe Demilitarized Border Zone represented only the location of

the separation line between the armed forces of the two countries and had no bearing on the definitive and final location of the boundary. With this decision, the Sudan and South Sudan resolved their dispute over the centreline of the Zone and provided the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism with a defined area of operations.

Border demarcation discussions

31. Following the meeting of the Joint Political and Security Mechanism held on 15 May 2017, UNISFA invited the technical team of the African Union Border Programme to mark on the ground the coordinates of the border crossing corridors. From 14 to 22 September, the team undertook an initial mission to UNISFA to meet the parties and prepare the support, identification and marking on the ground of the border crossing points at Safaha, Sumayh, Tishwin and Abu Qussa. Owing to inclement weather, prior mine clearance of the area could not be undertaken and, as a result, ground reconnaissance and marking were postponed. Furthermore, the technical representatives of the parties, whose participation is crucial to the preparation of the ground mission and, in particular, raising the awareness of the population, did not attend this initial mission.

32. With regard to the discussions on the contested areas of the border, the documents required for the finalization of a non-binding opinion on the disputed, and then the claimed, areas of the border are yet to be provided by the parties to the African Union technical experts for their consideration.

Meetings of the Joint Political and Security Mechanism

33. The Joint Political and Security Mechanism held its last extraordinary meeting on 14 and 15 May (see S/2017/649), during which the parties committed themselves to resuming regular meetings at the agreed 45-day intervals. Overall, limited progress has been made in the implementation of the decisions taken at that meeting, in particular with regard to the establishment of the ad hoc committee for the 14 Mile Area. The Sudan postponed the regular meeting of the Mechanism, which had been scheduled to be held in Juba by the end of June, accusing South Sudan of supporting rebels involved in a confrontation with the Sudanese Armed Forces in late May and early June and of having its forces north of the Safe Demilitarized Border Zone. In response, South Sudan accused the Sudan of harbouring opposition groups on its territory and did not invite the Sudan to Juba for the meeting of the Mechanism.

34. To prepare for the meeting of the Joint Political and Security Mechanism scheduled for June 2017, the Joint Security Committee was to implement its decisions of 30 September 2016. The decisions addressed the alleged presence of the armed forces in the north and south of the Safe Demilitarized Border Zone and the support for armed groups and the expulsion of those groups. However, the Mechanism did not meet in Juba by mid-June as agreed. The Joint Security Committee was established through a decision adopted by the Mechanism at its meeting held in April 2013 to discuss such concerns and resolve such allegations. However, the Committee has not met or implemented the decisions emanating from the meeting of the Mechanism held in May 2017. Both parties reiterated during the reporting period that specific action could be taken only following the expected meeting between the President of the Sudan and the President of South Sudan, for which a date is yet to be announced.

Freedom of movement

35. Considerable progress has been made by the Government of South Sudan to grant full freedom of movement in relation to the operations of the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism. The helipad at Gok Machar is now fully functional and expedited approval procedures to provide clearance for aerial patrols conducted by the Mechanism have been implemented. Of 18 planned aerial patrols within the reporting period, only 4 were cancelled, representing a cancellation rate of 22 per cent. The cancellations resulted from inclement weather (on two occasions), technical difficulties and the unavailability of air assets (on one occasion each). Compared with the average rate of 56 per cent, this was the lowest cancellation rate recorded since the Mechanism began operations in 2013.

Operational progress towards full operating capability

36. To advance the implementation of the decisions adopted at the most recent meeting of the Joint Political and Security Mechanism, held in May, UNISFA proposed plans to the parties to establish four temporary observation sites in the Safe Demilitarized Border Zone, at Safaha, Sumayh, Tishwin and Abu Qussa, in the vicinity of 4 of the 10 agreed border crossing corridors. The presence of the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism at these sites would serve as a confidence-building measure towards marking border crossing points and subsequently establishing immigration posts with a view to normalizing relations between the two countries at agreed locations.

37. On 24 August, UNISFA sought clearance on the plans and the reconnaissance routes from both parties. In a positive move, both parties agreed to participate in a mission to mark the four temporary observation sites. Representatives of the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism from Juba and Khartoum, together with their national monitors based at the Sector headquarters in Kadugli, arrived in Abyei on 14 September to begin joint reconnaissance missions with UNISFA with a view to identifying the four temporary observation sites. The joint team consisted of representatives of the Mechanism, national monitors, the technical team of the African Union Border Programme and UNISFA, including the Mine Action Service.

38. According to the plan developed by UNISFA, the joint team would move to each location by helicopter, while a ground team with the Mine Action Service would carry out exploratory operations in mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicles to ensure that the landing site was free from any explosive ordnance. Upon review, the joint team established that, owing to the rainy season, the roads would be impassable for the heavy vehicles. Consequently, the joint team decided to initiate aerial reconnaissance missions as an alternative. It was noted that further security clearances were required for the Abu Qussa location, with a new flight plan required to account for refuelling at Bentiu, South Sudan, for the return journey.

39. On 16 September, initial aerial reconnaissance missions were conducted by UNISFA aircrews for the sites at Safaha, Sumayh and Tishwin, with the joint teams to join in once the aircrews were familiar with the routes and locations. The following day, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) informed UNISFA at the sector headquarters of the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism in Gok Machar, South Sudan, that SPLA troops in the Sumayh area had been unaware of the aerial reconnaissance mission and had requested permission to shoot down the helicopter. UNISFA requested the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of South Sudan to investigate the incident, as approval of the plan and clearance for the route had been provided in advance. On 29 September, the SPLA Chief of Defence Forces responded by stating that there

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were communication problems with the commander based in the Gok Machar area and that he had been called to Juba to explain his actions.

40. On 20 September, the joint team conducted aerial reconnaissance of Safaha, Sumayh and Tishwin, but further clearances for Abu Qussa could not be obtained within the time constraints. Joint ground reconnaissance missions for all four locations will be conducted in the forthcoming dry season.

41. In a further show of commitment to making tangible progress towards achieving the full operational capability of the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism, the Government of South Sudan approved and facilitated a reconnaissance mission, from 14 to 17 August, to determine the site of the fourth Mechanism sector headquarters at either Malakal or Renk. The team recommended Renk as the more suitable site, although a preliminary request for the identification of suitable land at both locations has been submitted to the Government. Acquisition will proceed only after a decision is taken by the Joint Political and Security Mechanism at its next meeting.

Operations

42. During a routine aerial reconnaissance, on 20 September, an unknown camp was observed in the Safe Demilitarized Border Zone along the route AM-122 within the 14 Mile Area. An unknown military presence was also observed in the vicinity of the three temporary observation sites at Safaha, Sumayh and Tishwin during the joint aerial reconnaissance missions undertaken on the same day. UNISFA is verifying these reports and conducted preliminary aerial verification patrols over Tishwin on 2 October and in the 14 Mile Area on 4 October, which were inconclusive. In this regard, the mission plans to conduct further aerial patrols with upgraded optical systems along the border crossing corridors and in the vicinity of the three temporary observation sites to further verify any military presence in the Zone. These will be followed by ground patrols to confirm or disprove any military deployment in the Safe Demilitarized Border Zone by either party. If the presence of armed forces is confirmed at any of these locations, it would raise concerns regarding the claims by the parties that they have withdrawn their troops from the Zone and would reinforce the importance of continuous monitoring of the border.

43. Lastly, in line with the recommendation of the strategic review of 5 April 2017, UNISFA will conduct an assessment with technical experts from New York from 10 to 17 October to determine a possible cost-neutral upgrade option to improve visibility during aerial patrols. In the interim, UNISFA has procured a high-resolution camera that can be used immediately without any modifications to the aircraft. In addition, the mission has procured satellite imagery, in particular high-resolution images to cover areas of high interest in the Safe Demilitarized Border Zone.

IV. Financial aspects

44. The General Assembly, by its resolution 71/298, appropriated the amount of $266.7 million for the maintenance of the Force for the period from 1 July 2017 to 30 June 2018. As at 20 September, unpaid assessed contributions to the Special Account for UNISFA amounted to $70.0 million. Total outstanding assessed contributions for all peacekeeping operations as at that date amounted to $4,095.5 million. Troop costs have been reimbursed for the period up to 30 June, while the costs of contingent-owned equipment have been reimbursed for the period up to 31 March, in accordance with the quarterly payment schedule.

V. Observations and recommendations

45. UNISFA has clearly had a stabilizing role in Abyei and along the border region between the Sudan and South Sudan. No major confrontation has taken place between the forces of the two countries in the Abyei Area or the border area since 2011 and 2012, respectively. I commend the mission for its proactive posture and for supporting mediation and political engagement activities, which attest to the mission's commitment to peace, stability and the well-being of the people of Abyei and the border area.

46. The Force was set up to create a secure environment to enable the Sudan and South Sudan to settle their disputes at the negotiating table. UNISFA has played the role expected of it and Abyei has now become an area of refuge for displaced persons from South Sudan and a vibrant trade hub between the Sudan and South Sudan that serves as a testament to the strong bonds between the two peoples and the benefits of strong neighbourly relations.

47. The resilience of the local population is evident, with traditional leaders weighing in against spoilers. Cooperation and efforts to preserve the peace are most apparent in the Amiet common market, which remains the most visible symbol of the commitment of the two communities to peace and reconciliation. In this regard, I urge the Governments of the Sudan and South Sudan to consolidate the gains achieved by UNISFA at the local level by engaging actively in discussions to resolve the deadlock over establishing the Abyei Area Administration and Council and constitute the Abyei Police Service in order to address the pressing security and humanitarian concerns facing the people of Abyei.

48. While work continues with both parties to set up interim arrangements that would improve the lives of the people, efforts must also be directed at furthering the discussion on the final status of the territory. In that regard, I intend to approach the African Union to request an update on the status of the process. In my letter of 13 September addressed to the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, I sought support to advance the political resolution of the Abyei issue and prevent it from becoming a frozen conflict. Account is taken, of course, of the difficult internal circumstances facing the two countries and, in particular, of the intensifying crisis that has persisted in South Sudan since 2013, which has had a significant impact on the ability of the Government to further decision-making, including on the Abyei question. Nevertheless, five years after the signing of the cooperation agreements of 27 September 2012 and the proposal put forward by the African Union High-level Implementation Panel on 21 September 2012, the two countries must take advantage of the established mechanisms to solve outstanding issues and implement decisions. This is essential to further good neighbourly relations and avoid a relapse into conflict. I encourage the Governments to build on the progress made in other areas, notably regarding the implementation of the Agreement on Oil and Related Economic Matters, and to take the measures necessary to implement their pending bilateral agreements.

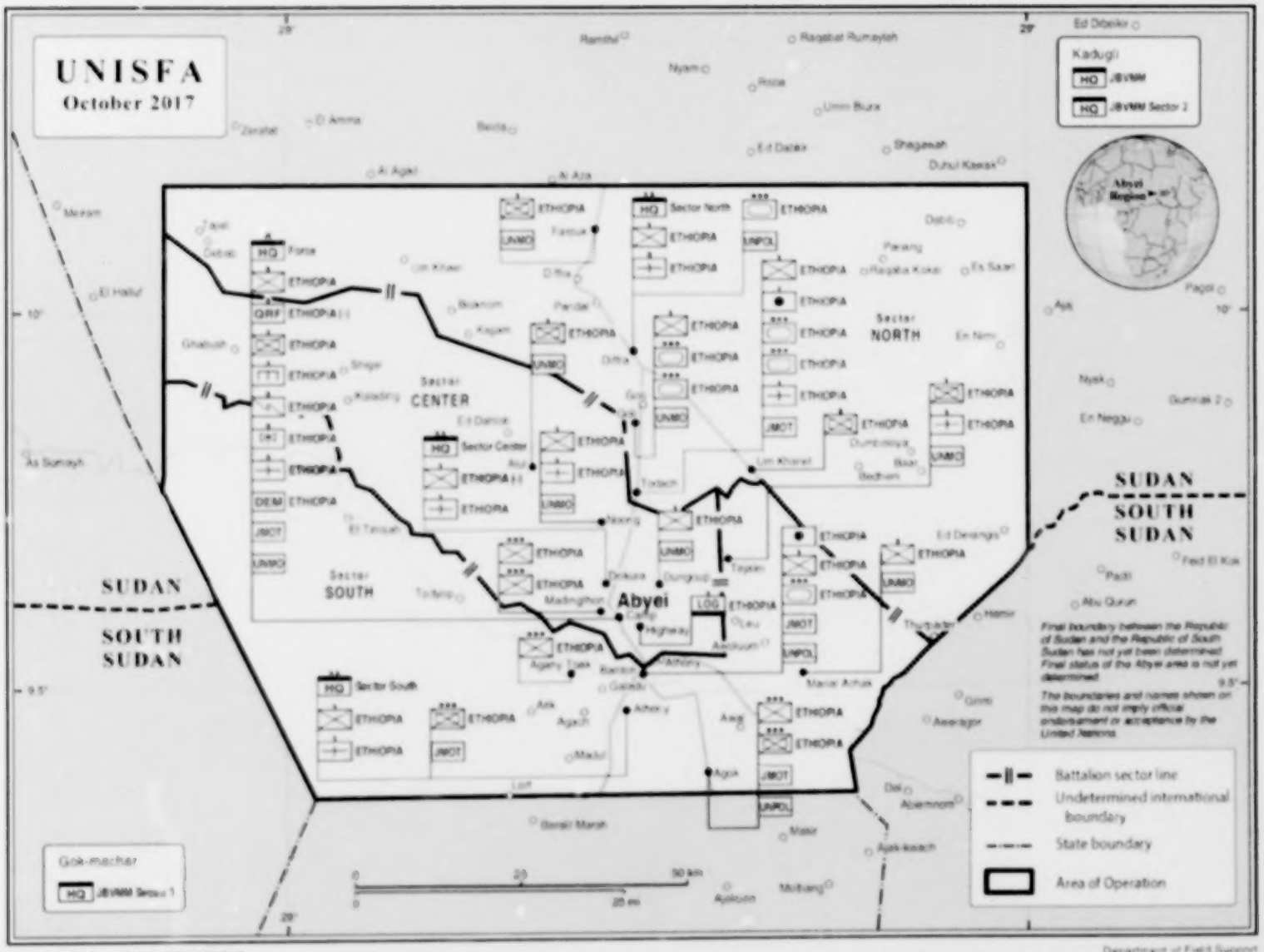
49. Earlier in the year, the two Governments made strides towards revitalizing their political dialogue, with a view to implementing their agreements on security arrangements, by convening an extraordinary meeting of the Joint Political and Security Mechanism in May. However, I am concerned that no further progress has subsequently been made. I am encouraged by the parties' participation in the reconnaissance missions to establish the four temporary observation sites in the Safe Demilitarized Border Zone, which represents a confidence-building measure that allows both parties to come together to mark the border crossing points.

50. I thank the two Ministers for Foreign Affairs for their joint letter dated 23 September, in which they stressed their commitment to the agreements and requested continued support from the international community. Much is expected of the meeting envisaged between the President of the Sudan and the President of South Sudan, and I urge them to work together to unlock the status quo, both by discussing a way forward on Abyei and by moving forward on the agreed security agenda. Failing that, I call upon the African Union High-level Implementation Panel to convene an extraordinary session of the Joint Political and Security Mechanism. In the same vein, I call upon the Peace and Security Council of the African Union to do its utmost to encourage the two Governments to collaborate constructively in resolving their problems.

51. As stressed by the Security Council during its previous consultations on UNISFA, the primary responsibility rests with the Sudan and South Sudan to demonstrate progress in implementing the provisions of their agreements on security arrangements of 2012 in order to address outstanding issues on their common border. I strongly reiterate the point that the situation will remain in limbo until the parties act responsibly to perform their international legal duties under the agreements, regardless of the resources channelled into maintaining relative stability in Abyei. In that connection, I call upon the Security Council to redouble its efforts to compel the parties to discharge their obligations. To that end, the Organization must work in tandem with the African Union, the Special Envoy and other partners.

52. In considering the future of the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism, while bearing in mind the mutually reinforcing roles of the Mechanism and UNISFA, the Security Council must maintain its emphasis on the primary responsibility of the parties. At the same time, I urge the Council to give due consideration to the imperative to preserve the achievements of relative stability realized through the work of UNISFA, both towards maintaining peace and stability in the Abyei Area and preventing confrontations along the border between the Sudan and South Sudan. These achievements should be protected to contain the real risk of relapse into international armed conflict. I therefore recommend the extension of the mandate of UNISFA for another six months with the expectation that both Governments will make progress towards fulfilling the commitments that they have defined for themselves in their agreements.

53. In conclusion, I extend my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the acting Head of Mission and Force Commander, Major General Tesfay Gidey Hailemichael, and to UNISFA personnel for their efforts to maintain peace and stability in the Abyei Area, under challenging conditions. I also commend my Special Envoy, Nicholas Haysom, as well as the African Union High-level Implementation Panel, the African Union Commission, the Peace and Security Council of the African Union and the Government of Ethiopia, for remaining engaged with the two Governments in support of the stabilization of the Abyei Area.


UNISFA
October 2017
Kadugli
HQ JBVMM
HQ JBVMM Sector 2
Abyei Region
Sector NORTH
Sector CENTER
Sector SOUTH
Abyei
SUDAN
SOUTH SUDAN
Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined. Final status of the Abyei area is not yet determined.
The boundaries and names shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.
Battalion sector line
Undetermined international boundary
State boundary
Area of Operation
Goli-machar
HQ JBVMM Sector 1
0 20 50 km
0 20 35 mi

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Department of Field Support
Geospatial Information Section (formerly Cartographic Section)